SENATE	FINANCE & CLAIMS
Exhibit No	8
Date	4-3-13
OIII No.	1802

## Carol A. Bronson

733 – 32<sup>nd</sup> Avenue NE Great Falls, MT 59404 cbronson@bresnan.net 406-781-9537 April 2, 2013

Prudence Gildroy

Montana Senate Finance and Claims Committee Secretary/ VIA EMAIL: pgildroy@mt.gov

Dear Ms. Gildroy:

I urge you to insert \$300,000 in funding for the Montana Main Street (MMS) program into HB 2 for this biennium. As a taxpayer, I thank you for your past support for the Montana Main Street Program. The Montana Main Street program continues to play a part in the economic revitalization going on in Downtown Great Falls ~ and throughout the state. Although I cite examples from Great Falls, the service and value of the MMS program is repeated throughout the state. Montana Main Street program represents the wider investment in and dedication of 21 communities to work collaboratively to revitalize their Montana downtown commercial districts.

In addition to providing small business owners with technical assistance and developers with tools to visualize what one community's Downtown might look like, MMS serves as an anchor and catalyst for economic revitalization of the downtown. Because Great Falls is now a MMS affiliate, since 2011, we began tracking the amount of volunteer hours committed to the Downtown, and it is astonishing. In calendar year 2012, Great Falls downtown volunteers *provided over* 16,000 hours of their time to make the Downtown safe, vibrant and livable. That shows the extent to which citizens in Cascade County are dedicated to the Downtown.

The Montana Main Street's technical and organizational assistance, competitive grants, and education programs have been an essential part of the revitalization of Downtown Great Falls. Tourism is also a huge economic engine for the state, bringing dollars from all over the world to a Montana that is real, historic and authentic.... Exactly the themes that the Main Street concept delineates. Consider what the Main Street program has done for Great Falls:

## 2013: Technical Assistance from MMS Staff:

Responding to a request by City of Great Falls for interpretive planning and professional input about potential Cascade County rural downtown project and securing outside grant funding of \$35,000. Staff suggested possible collaborators in the region including the SHPO, Montana Preservation Alliance, Montana Historical Society and several Montana Main Street communities that may be interested in participation, support, and insight.

Staff participated in a planning meeting with members of the Great Falls Downtown Development Partnership, (DDP) which then endorsed the Main Street concept and approach and adopted the Main Street Committee structure into their 2013 Work Plan. The newly formed Downtown Development Partnership, a collaboration of organizations such as the Great Falls Business Improvement District (BID), Downtown Great Falls Association (DGFA), NeighborWorks Great Falls, and the Chamber of Commerce serves as a champion for Downtown. Remaining MMS funding will provide the DDP with funding to create a website that creates a unified online presence and support its downtown revitalization efforts.

2012: Technical Assistance, Speaker Sponsorship, Conference Support, Downtown Website Design: \$3,000 MMS sponsored world-renowned economic development expert Donovan Rypkema, to provide technical assistance and speak at the state Montana Downtown Conference in October 2012. Staff also worked with Great Falls BID, DGFA, and the City of Great Falls in planning the Montana Downtown Conference.

MMS staff responded to a request for information by City of Great Falls Historic Preservation Officer (HPO) about connections between economic development and tourism in Montana communities. Staff advised the HPO of long-term historical connections between tourism and economic development throughout Montana and the interplay between the economy and tourism patterns. In addition, the utilization of Institute for Tourism and Recreation Research online-published reports as sources was advised and reminded HPO of Montana Office of Tourism upcoming grants that emphasize tourism, economic development and historical sites. The HPO was able to identify sources to be cited for public presentation on the economics of tourism in Montana.

MMS staff also identified and clarified Downtown projects in line with Montana Main Street Program funding at the request of City of Great Falls. The DDP determining needs for future project planning and considering creation of website, façade improvements, and structural assessments that fit into implementation of Great Falls Downtown Master Plan. Staff advised that all projects could be funded and that DDP could determine the best approach to completing these in combinations or in part and reminded of current and upcoming grant cycles.

2011: Technical Assistance & Speaker: \$2,500. MMS funding allowed nationally recognized rehabilitation specialist Joe



Lawniczak to provide a design workshop and produce 5 architectural renderings that provided a way for people to visualize possible downtown building improvements. The workshop identified the benefits of historic preservation, proper restoration techniques, effective downtown signage, the basics of visual merchandising, and low-cost, high-impact façade improvements that would benefit both the business owners and the downtown as a whole. Displayed at the Great Falls Civic Center, the renderings comprise the design vision and goals of the Great Falls Downtown Master Plan. In addition, the DDP identified the renderings as a major component of its downtown vision and planning process. See the further detail below.

2010: Technical Assistance & Speaker: \$2,500. MMS funding provided a Small Business Design Workshop: Every Business Has a Billboard. Susan Shaddox assisted individual downtown business owners on issues of storefronts, signage, merchandising, and window displays. The workshop focused on how to attract consumers to downtown districts, filling and utilizing vacant retail spaces, and identifying practical and effective solutions for small business owners with limited budgets.

The community then braided these MMS funds with the (former) *federal Preserve America program* through the Montana State Historic Preservation Office, to provide funding to establish the Downtown Great Falls Feasibility Studies. As an integral part of the ongoing master planning process, this program provided 4 feasibility studies showing strategies to encourage property owners and developers to the economic development process to address the adaptive reuse, rehabilitation and preservation of historic buildings and sites in the Downtown.

From the first building design renderings created with MMS dollars in 2011, came the feasibility studies and now, actual projects. These include the iconic Rocky Mountain Building and the Arvon Block, the oldest building in Downtown Great Falls, and the Baum-Trinistich building that now houses a law firm on all three floors. These revitalized buildings will provide the state significantly higher property taxes, as the previously vacant or severely underutilized buildings are being turned into high value properties.

In addition, the renovated businesses bring employees and trade traffic that draws in resident and visitor dollars to the Great Falls economy. Out of the initial four feasibility studies, one commercial rehab is complete; one is slated to be completed with an Irish pub and boutique hotel, and a third is working on financing. Although the Preserve America program is no longer funded, the Main Street program becomes an even more essential tool for revitalizing Montana communities.

In several years time, then, enormous collaborative efforts have leveraged significant accomplishments in Great Falls Downtown  $\sim$  just as they have in other Montana communities. In Great Falls, there is now a Downtown Master Plan and the Downtown Development Partnership to serve as a champion for the Downtown. In the future, Great Falls will continue to grow.

The organizations, governmental entities and residents that work hard toward revitalizing the Downtown should have the opportunity to utilize Main Street program technical assistance and grant funding. In fact, that funding and expertise is essential; the 21 communities enrolled in the Montana Main Street program rely on it. Although the grants have been small in the past, they significantly impact to those communities. As the State moves toward the future, it is critical to Great Falls and all of Montana that the Montana Main Street program be continued. Thank you.

Sincerely,

Carol A. Bronson

mal altranson